

MSU Extension Publication Archive

Archive copy of publication, do not use for current recommendations. Up-to-date information about many topics can be obtained from your local Extension office.

Children and Disaster: Part 2 What Parents and Caregivers can Say and Do

Michigan State University

Cooperative Extension Service

Dawn C. Koger, Program Leader, Family and Consumer Sciences

Issued January 2006

4 pages

The PDF file was provided courtesy of the Michigan State University Library

Scroll down to view the publication.



Family and Youth Security Series

Children and Disaster: Part 2 What Parents and Caregivers Can Say and Do

*Dawn C. Koger, Program Leader, Family and Consumer Sciences,
Michigan State University Extension*

Disasters, both natural and man-made, happen all over the world. Whether it is an earthquake, a chemical spill, a mud slide or a terrorist attack, extensive media coverage brings images of disaster into the lives of nearly every family across our country. Even if children do not personally know anyone who is affected by the loss and destruction that goes along with these kinds of disasters, they have probably seen or heard about them in their neighborhood, school or living room.



As you look for words to use, keep in mind what a particular child is capable of understanding. Is the child's natural tendency to be anxious, fearful or worrisome, or relaxed and calm? Consider the child's history of trauma and loss, as well. Children who have experienced trauma and loss before will have different needs than those who have not. All of these factors will affect how you can expect a particular child to understand and react to what he/she sees and hears.

It is usually quite difficult to describe or explain disasters. By definition, most disasters are sudden and out of our control, which makes them that much more terrifying. Yet, those of us who care for and about children are faced with the daunting task of explaining things such as earthquakes, hurricanes, plane crashes and even wars to our young people. Though it is never easy to talk about difficult subjects and there are no perfect words, there are ways to help children understand and cope with disaster and trauma.

The following guidelines are categorized by age group and offer ways to support children during disaster. Keep in mind that the suggestions are generic and what you say and do needs to be tailored to the developmental stage, personality and life experiences of individual children.

Infants and Toddlers

Young children are learning whether their world is a safe and secure place. They are establishing relationships with family members and other important caregivers, and they need the comfort and security of loving adults who consistently meet their needs. Very young children are generally unaware of current world events; however, they will pick up on the stress and anxiety their caregivers are feeling.

What parents and other caregivers can do:

Children this age need structure, routines and predictability, along with a calm, supportive and responsive caregiver who is able to consistently meet their needs, in times

of great distress or not. Try to do things just as you did before the disaster, if you can. Knowing what to expect and when helps young children feel safe and secure. If you or your family was affected by the disaster directly, try to have something familiar for your child, such as a blanket or special toy. Loved objects bring young children a great deal of comfort and security. Also, be sure to take care of your own emotional needs as much as possible so that you are able to meet the needs of others. Sometimes, getting help for yourself is the best way to help your child.



What Parents Can Say

If you need to talk about what happened with your preschooler, start with a question to determine what she already knows and what her concerns may be. Ask questions such as:

- “What do you think happened?”
- “That looked scary when that building fell down. What do you think about that?”
- “What worries you?”
- “Tell me about what you saw.”

Answer questions truthfully, using simple, factual language. Use the child's words as much as possible. Remember that children's primary concern will be their own safety and

Preschoolers

Preschool children, ages 3 to 5, are unable to understand abstract ideas and language. Time, distance and location are confusing to children this age. They will not understand that something they see or hear about is happening far away. Nor will they realize that a single event is being rebroadcast time and time again on the television. Instead, they have a sense that something keeps happening over and over and that it is happening close to them. Also, preschoolers have active imaginations and trouble distinguishing between fantasy and reality.

What Parents Can Do

As caregivers of preschoolers, our first and foremost responsibility is to protect them. If they have not seen or heard about what happened, there is no need to tell them. On the other hand, if preschoolers have been exposed to the events, our main concern is to reassure their sense of safety and security. Preschoolers will be worried about their lives, their families and their daily routines. If your preschooler is anxious or worried, find creative ways for her to express herself. Try reading children's books that talk about disaster-related concerns, or allow her to play out her feelings. Keep her routine as consistent as possible, as well. Preschoolers find comfort and security in knowing what to expect and when.

security, so be as patient and reassuring as possible. She also may ask the same questions over and over. This is completely normal and one of the ways she tries to make sense of what she sees and hears. Examples of ways to talk to preschool-aged children include:

- “Some people did something very bad and a lot of people got hurt and died.”
- “Hurting other people is never a good way to solve problems.”
- “Sometimes the ground moves and cracks apart. It is called an earthquake.”
- “I feel sad that people's houses were washed away in the deep water.”
- “A hurricane is a rainy windstorm. They happen in places by the ocean.”
- “The grown-ups who care about you are trying very hard to keep you safe and protect you.”

School-aged Children

School-aged children 6 to 12 years old are curious, like detailed information and will ask questions about what they want to know. Although they are beginning to understand complex ideas, they still may have difficulty distinguishing between fact and opinion, exaggeration and

truth. School-aged children understand that there are consequences to behaviors and are concerned about fairness and punishment. They also grasp the permanence of death and loss, and may feel sad or angry that people — even strangers — have lost their lives. At this age, many children use humor inappropriately and may be insensitive to the needs of others as they sort through their own feelings.

What Parents Can Do:

Regardless of whether you have exposed your school-aged child to what happened, he has probably heard something about it from his friends, at school or on the news. Children often misunderstand important ideas or details. It is important that caring adults have and are willing to share accurate and complete information in a manner that is consistent with their child's developmental level. Also, normalize the feelings children express by explaining that many other people feel exactly the same way. Expect some regressive behaviors, as well. Children adversely affected by disasters may revert to younger behaviors such as bed-wetting, nightmares, irrational fears and co-sleeping. Finally, because children this age spend so much time outside of the home, make sure the school is aware of ways to support children who are coping with the aftermath of disaster.

What Parents Can Say

Because he may be getting information from many sources, it is especially important that you initiate conversation with your child and help him sort out his thoughts and feelings. Begin with a question to determine what he has seen and heard and how he understands it. Ask questions such as:

- “What have you heard about what happened in Iraq?”
- “Have your teachers or friends at school talked about what happened?”

- “Do you worry about what happened? What exactly worries you?”
- “Do you have any ideas about how storms like this happen?”

Encourage your children to talk about what they have seen or heard often and in many ways. Listen to their ideas when they feel like talking, ask open-ended questions or have them retell the story. When children are encouraged

to talk openly and honestly, they hear the message that nothing is so terrible that it cannot be talked about. Keep in mind that school-aged children worry about the safety and security of themselves, their families and their friends. Address their worries and concerns in a simple, direct way, explaining the facts as they happened. Say things such as:

- “A war is when countries fight and one way that countries think they can solve problems.”
- “I don't know why something like this had to happen, but there are people who are working really hard to figure out how to keep us safe.”
- “I think a lot of people are wondering if a storm like this will happen where they live.”

- “A lot of adults are doing whatever they can to make things safer for all of us who live here.”
- “I was shocked when I saw what happened. I feel sad that so many people died.”
- “Sometimes I worry that a hurricane will happen here, but we have a plan to keep our family safe.”

Older school-aged children may resist sharing their thoughts and feelings, especially with adults. Consider sharing some of your own feelings to stimulate conversation, and discuss topics such as natural catastrophes, grief, loss, anger management and conflict resolution. To focus



the conversation in a way that is most relevant to preadolescent children, say things such as:

- “It is hard to understand why things like this happen in the world.”
- “Terrorists are people who try to scare and intimidate others by killing and destroying.”
- “I was offended by your jokes, especially since I am so sad.”
- “What sorts of things do you think might happen as a result of this?”
- “Let's think about ways we can help.”



details about the events or enjoy debating their views with you, they often prefer sharing feelings with their peers. Make sure they know the lines of communication are open, but respect their need to connect with, and possibly conform to, their peer group in times such as these.

What Parents Can Say

Begin a dialogue with teens by asking questions to determine their feelings and concerns. Ask questions such as:

- “How do you feel about what happened?”

Teen-agers

Teen-agers, ages 13 and older, are able to understand complex issues, and many of them will be able to discuss events on the same level as an adult. Teen-agers need to explore issues to develop their own views, and they typically enjoy discussing moral and philosophical topics. Teenagers are concerned about the future, fairness and justice. Disasters enhance their vulnerability and threaten their sense of security and hope for the future.

What Parents Can Do

This is an excellent opportunity to discuss complex issues such as violence, racism, hate, war, religion and politics. Do not be surprised if adolescents become so interested in their position that they feel the need to take a stand or become politically or socially active. Disasters enhance all of our feelings of vulnerability, and becoming involved often helps adolescents feel more powerful and in control. Remember though, that while teen-agers may ask you for

- “What do you think motivates a terrorist?”
- “When is war OK?” or “Is war ever OK?”
- “Why would someone kill himself and so many others for a cause?”
- “Are you worried that there will be a war?”
- “What were your first thoughts when this happened?”
- “I would like to contribute to the relief efforts. Do you have any ideas?”

References

- Gordon, N.S., N.L. Farberow and C.A. Maida. 1999. *Children and Disasters: The Trauma and Loss Series*. Philadelphia, Pa.: Brunner/Mazel.
- Trozzi, Maria. 1999. *Talking with Children About Loss: Words, Strategies and Wisdom to Help Children Cope with Death, Divorce, and Other Difficult Times*. New York: The Berkeley Publishing Group.